

# THE LOCUTORIUM

## THE FORMING HOME

### AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW LEVERING

*Justin Bolger, O.P.*

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## I. CULTURE AND IMAGINATION

*We Dominican student brothers live in a house of formation. But the first house of formation is the domestic home. These questions will focus on how the home influences the imagination, the virtues, and the Faith.*

*First, let's talk about the imagination and its influences. How did stories influence you as a child and how do they influence you as a father?*

I read a lot of children's books as a child, but not necessarily the most profound! There is a series called *Mrs. Pigglegwiggle*. The basic theme of the series is that Mrs. Pigglegwiggle helps parents who do not know how to handle a particular difficulty or personality flaw that a child is going through. In part by using magic—which I do not endorse (though I don't mind it at all in children's stories, including the magnificent *Harry Potter* series)—Mrs. Pigglegwiggle resolves the child's difficulty and sends the child back to his or her parents cured. The importance of Mrs. Pigglegwiggle is that she advocates a flexible use of varying strategies. In the face of failures of communication, a parent has to use various strategies. Rather than giving up, a parent must seek another strategy for communicating something important. A parent has to be a bit wily!

Charlie Brown of the "Peanuts" comic books is a model for me. Part of parenting is to have a certain patience with one's own inadequacies and with those of others. People who expect that if they and/or others simply prayed and worked hard enough then all would go splendidly, have not accurately gauged the present condition of human nature. We are often faced with being not great at things. Charlie Brown knows what this feels like, and he endures criticism without giving up. The painful inadequacy of Charlie Brown is part of every life, including a parent's life, and it is something that we endure and work through with Charlie-

Brownish persistence, rather than overcome triumphantly as Snoopy does in his various imagined exploits (e.g., against the Red Baron). Being “pretty good” is something that belongs to Christian life even as we pray to be perfected. Even Saint Paul apparently had a weak personal presence, as well as a thorn in the flesh! Patience with the humbling “pretty good” aspects of our life and our parenting is necessary, alongside deep patience with others, if we are indeed going to have a hope of Christian perfection.

Another set of books that I enjoyed was the “Choose Your Own Adventure” series. I still recall the delight of opening my first of these books. I figured that I was pretty smart and that I’d be able to choose rightly until finally triumphing. Instead, I was truly shocked when I quickly chose wrongly in a devastating way. I think that it is important to keep a close eye on the choices that we make and that our children make. We may not always get it right, and tragedies can and do happen. We have strong grounds to hope that God will pull us through!

“The Adventures of Tintin” were a constant companion. I love the glorious oddity of the characters who surround Tintin, who himself was rather normal in many ways. The idiotic detectives Thomson and Thompson, the nutty Professor Calculus, the drunkard Captain Haddock, and so many more—a wondrous assortment of complete oddballs! When I grew up, I realized with sadness that in real life, the real oddballs, even when brilliant and extremely talented, often don’t get very far. Of course, once one gets to know people, almost everyone is a bit odd somehow. This is part of what makes life wonderful. The interesting characters to whom we are related and who populate our life help to make it wonderfully rich. In parenting, one expects to discover odd and delightful characteristics in one’s children, and one is usually not disappointed in this—although fully normal people such as Tintin are also wonderful too, and much needed!

*Tolkien or Lewis?*

Both. It may well be that I owe my faith, humanly speaking, to Lewis. His Narnia books made a very deep impression on me as a child—he opened a very powerful Christian worldview to me. I still think that the Narnia books are a lot more *realistic* than most nonfiction, despite all the inventive elements in the Narnia books. They are realistic about persons, God, and Christ. The inventive stuff makes it exciting, but the realism drives it. For me, Lewis is one of the greatest Christian thinkers who ever lived.

Tolkien's creation of the 'ring'—cleaving to the ring of mammon, and having it suck the soul out of oneself, relying upon grace to escape the power of the ring—arguably offers a more powerful evocation of Christian experience, especially when connected with the journeys through an apocalyptic landscape with scattered places of safe-haven. One sees here an image of the modern world. But when one attends to the particular stories of Narnia, and adds to them great works such as *That Hideous Strength* with its extraordinary indictment of the academic-political-medical complex, then one can see that we need both Lewis and Tolkien (to say the least!).

*Do you have a favorite story you like to read to your children?*

My two older boys endured me reading to them my own favorites from childhood, whereas for the past few years I have been compelled to read what my younger two boys want. For the younger boys, I found that the *Encyclopedia Brown* stories worked well—very sane stories of an idyllic childhood in which the lead character knows how to solve problems for his father, who is the chief of police. It is interactive because each story requires that you guess how the boy, whose name is Encyclopedia, figured out the right answer. The answers are in the back of the book. Once my youngest son turned nine or ten, I started reading *Sherlock Holmes* stories to them, and by now we have gone through most of them. Those are very popular with my boys, and I am a big fan of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes often gets to the bottom of many of his cases by

careful attention to the oddities of individual personalities. But my own favorite story is *The Wind in the Willows*, which I have read to both sets of boys. The character of Toad exemplifies the treasure of real zest for life, and the character of Rat is a true friend.

*What does the term “moral imagination” mean to you and how would you say it is cultivated? What does a moral imagination enable a person to see or do?*

I think it means attentiveness to persons, although truly I am not sure. I admire people who are able to draw the best out of other people, in shared enterprises. To me, “moral imagination” means the ability to pursue the universal call to holiness without denying the oddity and weaknesses that we possess and that those whom we are called to love possess. A true love for the weak and vulnerable has to be based on having enough moral imagination to realize that one is weak and vulnerable oneself. I have a feeling that this answer means that I don’t understand “moral imagination”!

*I read somewhere that you once tried to be a novelist. If you could write a spy novel what would be the storyline in a paragraph or so?*

I did try to become a novelist in the vein of Walker Percy or Dostoevsky. It was the year after I graduated from college. My wife Joy and I got married on January 2, 1993, when we were undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I had a college fund that my grandmother had given me, and I had not spent it all during college, so after college I tried to become a novelist for a few months. Neither Joy nor I were Catholic at the time, and in fact I didn’t know that theology existed. I wrote novels for a few months and discovered two things: (1) that I have no ability to write good novels because I have no ear for how people talk and no eye for physical detail; (2) that writing fiction about

religious quests is insufficient to resolve such quests—we need theology and philosophy that explores such questions as whether God exists and whether Jesus rose from the dead.

I think that if I had the gifts to write a spy novel, the lead characters would be based on Fr. Fessio and Mr. Thomas Monaghan! They don't need to worry, however, because I can't even write a storyline for a spy novel! But certainly it would involve intrigue among Christians in a world of nihilist cynics, semi-educated intellectuals, and Brave New World epicureans.

*What's the difference between a good movie and a movie with good intentions?*

I love the Marx brothers' movies and Woody Allen's movies. Allen explores the beauty of real human relationships in his movies, and he contrasts these with people who have gotten caught up in themselves, whether because they are wealthy or because they are artists or for some other reason (such as sin). His great movies about artists include *Sweet and Lowdown* and *Bullets over Broadway*, in neither of which does he appear as an actor. Recently, his *Blue Jasmine* explores what happens when there is no source of grace and mercy for people who have done evil things. His *Irrational Man* is a devastating attack upon modern philosophy and its rejection of natural law. Allen writes these movies himself, and it seems to me that a "good movie" is one that is honest in some deep way. To write with real honesty about deep internal matters takes a particular gift. Truly great movie scripts, like theatrical plays, touch something deep. Allen takes the internal pain that he must feel (given his history of misdeeds), and he puts this real pain in many of his film scripts. The Marx brothers do the same with their send-ups of social situations. From the position of outsiders who somehow find themselves on the inside, they probe their own foolishness and the painful foolishness of political, academic, and societal leaders. A "movie with good intentions" lacks this

deepest kind of honesty, but may be much easier to watch! I like the original *Star Wars* series because of its powerful sense of the *libido dominandi*, the lust for domination that seduces people.



*The Leverings*

*Back row: Andrew, David, Matthew, Joy, Irene*

*Front row: Daniel, Lucy, John (photo courtesy of Matthew Levering)*

*There's an exaltation of adolescence in many movies. This seems to be connected to a kind of Romanticism that rightly acknowledges a human desire for innocence but fails to see how a libertine approach ultimately ends in frustration. What is the Catholic response to this trend?*

There is something marvelous about being young! It has been years since I watched *Stand by Me*, but I remember being struck by that movie's combination of the beauty of youth, on the

one hand, with a deep awareness that a libertine lifestyle ends in the destruction of the young, on the other. Movies that take adolescence seriously convey characters who are not innocent in any pre-Fall sense. This was the genius of Spielberg's *E.T.*—the grown-ups have caused so much brokenness that the children have to turn to pets and an alien for solace, and they have to learn to love in that way. It may be that the exaltation of adolescence that you are talking about has to do with grown-ups behaving like crazy sensualists, i.e. movies such as *Animal House* and its many imitators today? In such movies, there is a deep sadness—no one knows how to live, and they go on journeys that lead to nothing. They recognize that libertinism leads to destruction, but if the alternative is a stuffy puritanical liberalism (that also believes in nothing transcendent), one can see why they are taking this path. In the cartoon movies that I watch (e.g., *Kuba and the Two Strings*, *Despicable Me*, *Zootopia*), the young people are the real adults, and the adults are often corrupt or dumb. The young people still believe in ideals. The problem is that their ideals often have no enduring basis, despite their loftiness and often their real goodness.

*There's a lot of toxic stuff out there in the secular word. But there are good elements as well. Prima facie it seems that the ideal approach for a parent would be to shield children from the former and expose them to the latter. But I imagine parents also want their children to be able to evaluate and criticize what is base in movies, books, and music in the culture. That suggests some sort of broad education in culture, which also implies an approach to parenting that is not overly protective. How do we strike this balance?*

For me, shielding my kids from the culture has not been an option. We have not home-schooled, although many of our friends have done so. My idea has always been to participate in the wider culture and to act as though we have nothing to fear from it because we can judge it. On the other hand, I have also fought a



general battle to restrict kids' computer usage and to avoid getting them cellphones—in order to make the point that governing such things is important, rather than the alternative, i.e. being governed by them. We have found that not talking about hot-button issues in the culture doesn't work for us. We have to talk about them with our kids, because otherwise the culture will be the only voice they hear.

I do not want to claim that I know the “balance,” especially since much depends in families upon the personalities involved and upon financial resources (etc.), and one size is not going to fit all. Essentially I have followed the model with which I was raised, which was to be part of the culture but to look down upon it critically.

## II. THE VIRTUES

*Classic Dominican formation emphasizes the role of the virtues in the pursuit of happiness—that if we want to be happy (and we all want that) then we must be virtuous. And virtues begin to take shape at a young age. What is unique to domestic life and formation in the virtues?*

Well, it is not clear that we have any virtues—that is the main lesson! I think that part of what domestic life teaches is the virtue of humility. There is a real humbling involved in domestic life, since everyone isn't at his or her best all the time, and the experience is humbling for both parents and children. Domestic life is a place where Pelagianism goes to die, but where real striving in Christ continues. Domestic life also is a place where the benefits of real virtue are displayed. True faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance are all deeply valued in domestic life—the whole household benefits from them, their beauty and value becomes crystal clear.

*I know a philosophy professor at a Catholic college who observed that most students are so influenced by secular culture that by the time they get to college a few courses in philosophy and theology are often insufficient to counter the moral and intellectual vices they have unfortunately acquired. Do you think this is true? If it is, what does it suggest about the need for early formation in children and adolescents?*

Personally, I'm not sure that there has ever been a good generation, since Adam and Eve. I wish I could blame today's culture, but the study of history persuades me that humans have always been rather wretched. I'm not sure that even a very Catholic culture could succeed in passing the faith on to the next generation, given the massive shifts in culture (both for worse and for better) to which history bears witness.

Catholic professors at colleges are in a difficult position, often in part because of the Student Life offices at their colleges. Often the Student Life office seems to be run in a way that leads to tremendous amount of alcohol abuse, sexual assault, and just general running amuck, in addition to bringing speakers onto campus who attack Catholic teaching. Catholic professors at such institutions often find themselves interacting with a very small group—a 'remnant'—that somehow has built up a small vibrant Catholic culture within the moral chaos of the institution. Most freshman undergrads whom I meet are still somewhat committed to ideals, still somewhat hopeful, and therefore still open to virtue and to Christ who gives true virtue!

*The concept of formation in the virtues is a simple one. We have powers of intellect, will, and appetite. Certain virtues perfect those powers in our pursuit of the good. Is there a good resource out there to help Catholic parents understand this truth about the human person and so be able to employ it in the rearing of children? If there isn't, could you write one?*

I think that there are good resources! The Church's catechetical material is generally now quite good, at least if the parish buys it from the right sources. Authors such as Christopher Kaczor and many others are doing a lot of good, as are initiatives such as Fr. Peter John Cameron O.P.'s *Magnificat* and all that Bishop Barron does. My wife Joy has a book of Catholic questions that we now use for basic catechesis prior to saying family rosary at night. The materials are there, I think, but the difficulty still remains that the kids have to learn how to function and how to make a living in this culture, i.e. in their own society. I would like to see great improvements in the Catholic colleges and universities (and high schools), and in every case I would begin with reforming the Student Life offices, and then move from there.

*What meal does your concupiscible appetite find most enticing?*

Definitely Indian food, or Thai! Or Florida seafood. Or Bertucci's pizza.

### III. THE FAITH

*Most Catholics receive baptism when they are wee babes. But before religious education in the parish, children are catechized by their parents. How does this domestic education in the Faith differ from and complement that of the parish or school?*

My experience has been that a lot of it involves 'practices'—prayer before meals, family rosary, Mass, confession. My kids also say that I give lectures to them. CCD programs that give a solid biblical foundation are crucial, and Youcat is very valuable.

*Parents hand on the Faith to their children. How do father and mother do this in complementary ways?*

Personality is hugely important here. Basically, both parents have to show that the faith is important to them, and have to show that the faith is positive for them. Complaining about the Catholic Church would be faith-killing. My personality is more ‘distant’ than Joy’s, since she is just an incredibly wonderful person—the kids always feel free to talk to her. I think that my job is to be around and to show that I am willing to sacrifice by caring about my kids’ lives.

*There are false images of both the Catholic Faith and the family in society now. What is the nature of some of these challenges and respective solutions?*

The fundamental challenge is that society is now defining its foundations (such as marriage itself) in ways that are fully anti-Christian. Basically, one has to say to one’s kids, ‘You are going to be a second-class citizen, silenced and persecuted in many ways, and often under financial duress without support from society, for the rest of your life.’ Kids recognize what is going on, and they recognize the cost that they will have to pay. On the other hand, the culture is attacking natural law, and the fruits of the culture are poisonous—kids can see that too.

As far as solutions go, we need joyful priests and parents, and we need confident institutions that make an effort to live out the Catholic faith. We need more of the renewal that Pope John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict initiated. The joyful and confident preaching style of Pope Francis can help in this, even while the universal call to holiness needs to be at the forefront of our minds. Ultimately, the real solution is Catholics who are happy living Catholic lives.

*The Holy Family is our model for family life, yet all three persons are so unlike any of us. How should we then see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as modeling domestic life?*

Humility is the key here. Their deep humility and acceptance of humiliations is striking. They lived under deep duress, and then lived without any special prestige. They were faithful Jews who rejoiced in God. Again, I see family life as rooted in humility and also as rooted in humbling experiences (often through foibles of all the members of the family, which is not the case for the Holy Family, whose humbling came from persecution). From humility and humbling, joyful things can emerge.

*What about pets in the house? Cats, dogs, hamsters, fish, chickens? All, some, or none of the above?*

We have a cat, who is very rat-like and so we call it a ‘crat’, but the cat (whose name is Snickers) is a popular family member. I favor having a pet!

*Finally, is there a question you’ve always wanted to be asked and no one’s ever asked it? If so, please feel free to ask and answer yourself. Thanks!*

I’ve never thought that anyone would really want to ask me questions, and so I’m just honored that you thought to do so!

*Br. Justin Bolger entered the Order of Preachers in 2012 and hails from Frederick, MD. He studied business at the University of Baltimore and earned a masters degree in philosophical studies from Mount Saint Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, MD. He also wrote, recorded, and performed as a singer/songwriter.*